

# The Al-Hiraak Movement In Yemen: A Study of the Implications of Federalization on a Secession Movement

A Monograph

by

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## **Abstract**

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This monograph examines the growth of the Al-Hiraak secession movement in Yemen in order to examine how the movement may evolve when Yemen adopts a federal system. By examining the variables that led to the development of Al-Hiraak, it becomes clear that the interaction between the movement and the government of Yemen played the largest role in its development and demands. Utilizing elements of social movement theory, in particular the variables outlined in contentious politics, a case study of the Al-Hiraak movement indicates the significance of repression and cooptation in the history of the movement. These variables provide some ability to predict how the movement will evolve once the federal system is in place. They also allow for some extrapolation about the future of the struggle against Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) in Yemen. As the federal system will assuage most of the grievances advanced by the Al-Hiraak movement, it is likely to significantly reduce the political strife and dissonance that AQAP capitalized on to establish a foothold in the Yemeni population.

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## **Acronyms**

AQAP	Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula
CENTCOM	United States Central Command
DPA	Document of Pledge and Accord
FBI	Federal Bureau of Investigation
GCC	Gulf Cooperation Council
GPC	General People's Congress
NDC	National Dialogue Committee
PPT	Political Process Theory
RAT	Rational Action Theory
RMT	Resource Mobilization Theory
USAID	United States Agency for International Development
YSP	Yemeni Socialist Party

## Introduction

In Yemen, we have seen an increase in the prominence of al-Qaeda as it exploits the country's security, economic, and social challenges. The threat to Yemen, to the region, and, indeed, to the U.S. homeland posed by what is now called "al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula" (AQAP) has been demonstrated by suicide bombers trying to carry out operations in Yemen's capital, by the attempt to assassinate the Assistant Minister of Interior of Saudi Arabia, and by the attempted bombing of the U.S. airliner on Christmas Day.

-GEN David Petraeus, Senate Armed Services Committee Testimony

These remarks, made by GEN David Petraeus to the Senate Armed Services Committee in 2010, mirror much of what is thought about Yemen today. United States foreign policy towards Yemen overwhelmingly revolves around the real and growing terrorist threat, a threat correctly linked to intrastate instability. Efforts to support Yemeni stability rely on military aid to professionalize and restructure their security forces, with a smaller focus on developmental aid aimed at improving satisfaction with government responsiveness.<sup>1</sup>

This singular focus on Al Qaeda glosses over significant internal events in Yemen. In late 2012 President Ali Abdullah Saleh, the second-longest serving Middle Eastern president (behind the late Muammar al-Gaddafi), stepped down from office after a long and often violent series of protests. In an agreement brokered by the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), his replacement and former vice-president, Abd Rabbuh Mansur Hadi, and the interim Yemeni government established a National Dialogue Committee (NDC) in March 2013 intended to correct numerous internal grievances and pave the way for new elections and the formation of a new government.

In January 2014, after a series of missed deadlines, the NDC finally announced the creation of a federal system in Yemen. This agreement is intended to reverse the almost systematic marginalization of Southern Yemenis, an unfortunate side effect of a poorly planned unification in 1990 and the subsequent

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<sup>1</sup> United States Central Command (CENTCOM), "U.S. Central Command 2013 Posture Statement," accessed November 17, 2013, <http://www.centcom.mil/en/about-centcom/posture-statement/>; United States Agency for International Development (USAID), "USAID 2010-2012 Yemen Country Strategy," accessed October 12, 2013, [http://pdf.usaid.gov/pdf\\_docs/PDACP572.pdf](http://pdf.usaid.gov/pdf_docs/PDACP572.pdf).

but brief bloody civil war in 1994. Decentralizing political power under a federal system will give the new federal states a significantly increased measure of independence in political and economic affairs, while still keeping them united together under the nation of Yemen.

While a federal system does allow for greater autonomy of the newly established federal units, it does so at some potential risk. Decoupling the units from the central government could lead to an initial decrease in the security situation, as the government's control and ability to provide security will decline. Consequently it may provide additional breathing space for anti-government forces such as the Huthi in the north, and AQAP-affiliated elements in the south, allowing them to cement their gains and expand their power.<sup>2</sup>

This federal agreement also may not adequately address the ever-present "Southern Question." In 2007, a group known as Al-Hiraak began lobbying for improved treatment of the southern regions of Yemen. Their agenda shifted to complete secession from Yemen in response to then-President Saleh's heavy-handed repression of their protests.<sup>3</sup> Although Al-Hiraak was represented at the NDC, the core of the movement steadfastly refused to participate in any negotiations short of full independence.<sup>4</sup> These core Al-Hiraak are unlikely to be satisfied with the newly granted federal status, while those who resist the movement fear that federal status is merely one step closer to full independence from the north.<sup>5</sup>

Al-Hiraak is not frequently seen in the headlines. Nor is it directly addressed in United States policy towards Yemen. The USAID 2010-2012 Yemen Country Strategy mentions the existence of a

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<sup>2</sup> Theodore Karasik, "Tough Times Ahead for Yemen's Federation," *Yemen Times*, 18 Feb 2014, accessed 20 March 2014, <http://www.yementimes.com/en/1756/opinion/3496/Tough-times-ahead-for-Yemen's-federation.htm>.

<sup>3</sup> Steven Day, "Updating Yemeni National Unity: Could Lingering Regional Divisions Bring down the Regime?" *Middle East Journal* 62, no. 3 (2008): 420.

<sup>4</sup> Nadia Al-Sakkaf, "The Real Story Behind Hiraak's Revolt at the NDC," *Yemen Times*, 10 October 2013, accessed November 12, 2013, <http://www.yementimes.com/en/1719/viewpoint/3004/the-real-story-behind-hirak's-revolt-at-the-ndc.htm>; International Crisis Group, "Yemen's Southern Question: Avoiding a Breakdown," *Crisis Group Middle East Report* No. 145 (2013), 7.

<sup>5</sup> Rafat Al-Aklhai, "Will Decentralization in Yemen Marginalize Citizens?" *Yemen Times*, 6 February 2014, accessed 13 May, 2014, <http://www.yementimes.com/en/1753/opinion/3452/Will-decentralization-in-Yemen-marginalize-citizens.htm>.



political opposition party exactly once. United States Department of State policy on Yemen expresses explicit support for the National Dialogue Council and subsequent political transition, but does not specifically discuss any of the parties involved in the NDC.<sup>6</sup> The United States Central Command (CENTCOM) 2013 Posture Statement declares support for the national unity government, in order to “reduce the opportunity for violent extremists to hold terrain, challenge the elected government, or conduct operations against United States interests in the region or the homeland.”<sup>7</sup>

None of these statements explicitly acknowledge the existence of a politically legitimate secession movement, let alone hint at the causal factors that underpin Al-Hiraak. In order to truly understand the many internal issues in Yemen, attention must be paid to this roiling secession movement. Ongoing United States policy towards Yemen focuses primarily on countering the growth and influence of Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP). State Department and CENTCOM statements explicitly proffer support for national unification under some form of federal system. They expressly link all of the destabilizing factors in Yemen to a rising AQAP presence and ongoing Iranian influence. In doing so, they inadvertently group any element opposed to the status quo government in Yemen with violent extremist elements. This approach ignores the legitimate grievances of the Al-Hiraak movement, and by marginalizing their position, runs the risk of pushing them towards AQAP.<sup>8</sup>

Although the decision to move to a federal system was driven in no small part by the political and economic concerns of Al-Hiraak and the largely disenfranchised southern population, this decision is also likely to further stabilize the country by denying AQAP additional political space and resource support. The shift from central to federal state control will likely reduce the ability of Yemen to maintain its internal security, at least in the short term. However, by addressing many of the grievances that led to the formation of Al-Hiraak, the new federal system will provide an increasingly responsive and flexible

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<sup>6</sup> United States Department of State (DOS), “US Support for Yemen Fact Sheet,” accessed November 17, 2013, <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2013/08/212649.htm>.

<sup>7</sup> CENTCOM, 2013.

<sup>8</sup> Stephen Day, “Yemen: On the Brink,” *Middle East Program* no. 108 (2010), 11.

government that will better address the concerns of the southern population, and minimize the friction and discontent that AQAP needs to expand its operations. In order to explore this topic, I will lay out a methodology of approach, flesh out a literature review of contentious politics, conduct a case study of Yemen following the decision to federalize, and finally close with some recommendations for future policy.

### **Methodology**

This study will be completed through a single case study of the Al-Hiraak movement in Yemen. Examining this particular movement through the lens of contentious politics (specifically the ideas of repression and co-optation) during the uneasy history of unification of the country and the rise of the Al-Hiraak movement should provide some predictive value to understand how the move to a federal system will alter the movement itself. This study will also shed some light on how this federal system is likely to affect the growth of AQAP in Yemen.

Conducting a single case study intentionally limits the breadth of application of this project, and instead commits to an in-depth examination of one particular phenomenon. While this may at first glance appear limiting, it is the most appropriate manner in which to address the topic. John Gerring, a political science professor from Boston University, argues that a case study is best defined as "...the intensive study of a single unit wherever the aim is to shed light on a question pertaining to a broader class of units."<sup>9</sup> Therefore, an intensive study of one particular secession movement as related to United States foreign policy may in fact shed light on other similar movements across the globe.

To be sure, the nature of the movement in Yemen possesses many unique characteristics that may not be found in other secession movements. But by examining this single set of particular characteristics, it is possible to draw inferences that may inform United States policy towards Yemen. The inferences drawn from the study may also be applicable to a broader set of units, or they may turn out to

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<sup>9</sup> John Gerring, "What is a Case Study and What is it Good for?" *The American Political Science Review* 98, no. 2 (May 2004): 344.

be unique to this particular case study. Even if the study proves to be applicable only to the situation in Yemen, there is value in scholarship that seeks to describe simply one unit of study.

Single unit research designs provide the opportunity to derive descriptive inferences from the case in question. They allow for a bounded, in depth examination of a particular phenomenon, which will be of limited applicability to other cases, but provide significant insight into a particular case.<sup>10</sup> They provide information that may be comparable to other similar cases, but not necessarily representative.<sup>11</sup> So for example, a case study of the Al-Hiraak movement in Yemen will provide significant information that describes this particular movement, in its particular environment. The case study may be compared to that of another secession movement, for example that of Scotland from the United Kingdom. Comparing the two cases may provide some interesting similarities, but it is not likely that the causal factors found in Yemen can directly represent those in Scotland.

Academically, single unit case studies provide a better opportunity for exploratory research, or the quest for new theories. New theories most easily arrive from the examination of individual case studies, as academics work to identify the specific independent variables and causal mechanisms that may help explain their theories. These theories must then be subjected to multiple confirmatory tests, tests that draw upon a much larger number of cases.<sup>12</sup> This characteristic of case study designs makes it particularly applicable to political (and military) practitioners. If one accepts the premise that a policy directive or military campaign plan is in reality nothing more than a hypothesis, an explanation of a particular phenomenon that will be tested through real world application, then the use of single unit case studies should provide the best manner in which to derive these hypotheses. Because a case study is bounded to one particular unit, those examining it are at liberty to be very subjective in their generation of hypotheses. They do not have to be beholden to a large number of cases, which may present fewer

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 347.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 348.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 350.

potential hypotheses to explore. Therefore they are free to explore different approaches to the particular case.<sup>13</sup>

### **Literature Review**

This project will begin with a review of the literature surrounding the growth of Al-Hiraak in Yemen. It will then briefly review the literature on secession movements, and United States policy towards secession movements in order to provide some context for the upcoming case study. Finally, the study will review the literature on social movement theory and the development of the field of contentious politics.

#### **The Al-Hiraak Movement**

Current literature about the Al-Hiraak movement in Yemen tends to categorize the secession movement as a result of two major causal factors. First, it indicates that practices instituted in the country following the 1994 civil war grossly favored northern interests. This inequality eventually led to the rise of the Al-Hiraak movement, whose initial claims sought only to promote southern interests and rectify inequality. President Saleh's heavy-handed repression of the early movement, and his administration's refusal to grant any significant concessions to the south, served as the second factor leading to the secessionist movement. These responses ultimately led Al-Hiraak to modify their demands from correction of inequality to a call for complete independence.

Two authors, Stephen W. Day and Victoria Clark primarily see the rise of Al-Hiraak as an offshoot of a poorly executed unification and subsequent civil war. The unfair practices cemented into Yemeni society following the civil war set the south at a significant disadvantage, a move that eventually led to the emergence of a secession movement. In his early work, Day an International Affairs professor and Fulbright selectee, attributes the tension between north and south Yemen to the unresolved disputes

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

that led to the 1994 civil war.<sup>14</sup> The unification, he says, was rushed, poorly managed, and led to political and economic crises that eventually led to the brief civil war in 1994. However in more recent scholarship, Day links the rise of Al-Hiraak directly to presidential mismanagement following the 1990 unification. He cites two specific blunders that strengthened the southern secession movement. First, post-civil war policies enacted by President Saleh exacerbated the already existing regional differences, and strengthened the grievances already seen in southern Yemen. Second, the forced retirements of military and civilian employees, especially among the southern supporters of Ali Nasir Muhammad, both increased economic disparity and strengthened dissatisfaction with the Saleh regime.<sup>15</sup>

British author and Middle East expert Victoria Clark likewise links the growth of southern discontent to post-civil war conditions, and by extension, President Saleh's governance. She finds the most intractable roots of the issue developed as a direct result of land abuses committed by 'northern' (regime supporting) Yemenis after the 1994 civil war. Northern military leadership, transplanted northern elites, and other 'carpetbaggers' from Sana'a occupied, confiscated, and otherwise helped themselves to large tracts of desirable land in the south both during and after the conflict.<sup>16</sup>

Noel Brehony, the chairman of the British Yemeni Society, and recent reporting from The International Crisis Group tend to see the rise of Al-Hiraak as a secession movement, rather than a protest movement, as a direct result of then-President Saleh's repressive tactics. Noel Brehony's work does not specifically posit one driving force for the rise of Al-Hiraak, but he does suggest that much of the southern grievances are a result of the regime's treatment of the south in the years following the 1990 unification. More recently, he writes, Saleh's repression of Al-Hiraak served to reinforce these preexisting grievances, and corral the support of fence-sitting southerners for the independence movement.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Day, "Updating Yemeni National Unity," 428.

<sup>15</sup> Steven W. Day, *Regionalism and Rebellion in Yemen: A Troubled National Union* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 29.

<sup>16</sup> Victoria Clark, *Yemen: Dancing on the Heads of Snakes* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010), 141.

Brehony's argument tying the secession movement to regime repression is bolstered by recent studies done by the International Crisis Group. They report that Al-Hiraak initially developed as a movement intended to address specific regional grievances, but the regime's heavy-handed response led them to openly call for secession starting in 2008.<sup>18</sup>

This literature on Al-Hiraak certainly draws on pertinent events in Yemen, but does not really shed light on Al-Hiraak as a social movement. It focuses almost extensively on grievances resulting from a rushed unification. This event certainly played an important role in the formation and success of a social movement, but does not fully explain the mechanisms of the birth of the movement, or provide any real explanatory power. A review of the literature surrounding the field of contentious politics should help explore the movement in terms that are applicable to social movements across the globe, and also may indicate some scholarly arguments that could expand the linkages between international policy and possible cooperation with Al Qaeda in Yemen.

## Secession

There appears to be a definite lack of a unified theory on the right (or lack thereof) of a region to secede. Because political, ethnic, religious, economic, and international interests all may play a role in possible secession, it is almost impossible to reduce the phenomenon to one particular theory. Allen Buchanan understands the difficult nature of classifying secessionist movements because of these factors, and instead attempts to lay out moral arguments both supporting and rejecting the right to secede.

Buchanan, the James B. Duke Professor of philosophy at Duke University, examines more than 12 pro-secessionist arguments in an attempt to test for morality, all of which go beyond the simple "right

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<sup>17</sup> Noel Brehony, *Yemen Divided: The Story of a Failed State in South Arabia* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2011), 43.

<sup>18</sup> International Crisis Group, "Breaking Point? Yemen's Southern Question," *Crisis Group Middle East Report* No. 114, (2011): 4.

of self-determination” argument that is usually used to justify that type of movement.<sup>19</sup> Of these arguments, he classifies five as morally justifiable bases for secession: self-defense, cultural preservation, limited goals of political association, rectificatory justice, and the avoidance of discriminatory redistribution.<sup>20</sup>

In examining the arguments against secession, he finds only a few that meet the criteria of a moral argument. These include the right of self defense (in a case where the existence of the rump state is legitimately threatened either physically or economically by the secessionist region), soft paternalism (in which it is clear that the secessionist region will significantly restrict the civil liberties of its constituency), and the rectification of discriminatory redistribution.<sup>21</sup> Ultimately, Buchanan concludes that there exists a moral right to secede, albeit a highly qualified right. He concludes that, under certain conditions, movements should be afforded the opportunity to secede without outside interference. Buchanan caveats his findings by insisting that each potential secessionist case requires thorough investigation, and states that his argument is subjective in that it relies upon certain moral priorities that are not necessarily universally agreed upon.<sup>22</sup>

#### United States Policy Towards Secession Movements

The United States has a complicated relationship with secessionist conflicts. Born of a secessionist conflict itself, the United States fought for independence from British rule in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century. Less than a century later, the United States engaged in a bloody civil war to prevent the southern states from leaving the union. In the last two decades, the United States has alternated between supporting secessionist claims in places like Kosovo, East Timor, South Sudan, and backing the established

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<sup>19</sup> Allen Buchanan, *Secession: The Morality of Political Divorce from Fort Sumter to Lithuania and Quebec* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1991), 29.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 74.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 96-97, 101, 123.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 151.

government in Chechnya, Abkhazia, and Ukraine.<sup>23</sup> Generally speaking the United States prefers the status quo, which means that they will usually oppose secessionist movements.<sup>24</sup> But there is more to it than a simple status quo equation.

Jonathan Paquin, a historian at the Laval University in Quebec, examined the history of United States foreign policy and secessionist conflicts in an attempt to determine what, if any, stance the United States takes towards the idea of secessionism. By and large he determines that the United States has no specific policy towards secessionist movements, however historical examples indicate that the United States values regional stability over all other factors.<sup>25</sup> This generally means that the United States favors the status quo, and will therefore support the established central government against a secessionist threat. But there are factors that significantly influence United States policy in this field. Paquin finds that the United States will support a central government against a secessionist threat so long as the central government proves that it can contain the conflict and control its borders. If the government fails to control its borders, and if the secessionist party proves that it can maintain stability, then the United States will back the secession movement.<sup>26</sup> This stance has less to do with United States concerns about the country in question, or the perceived legitimacy of the secession movement. Paquin's work indicates that United States policy is, as a whole, much more interested in preserving regional stability, and therefore its own relative position, than any other factor.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Peter Baker, "Sovereignty vs. Self-Rule: Crimea Reignites Battle," *New York Times*, March 8, 2014, accessed May 14, 2014, [http://www.nytimes.com/2014/03/09/world/europe/crimea-crisis-revives-issue-of-secessions-legitimacy.html?smid=tw-share&\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2014/03/09/world/europe/crimea-crisis-revives-issue-of-secessions-legitimacy.html?smid=tw-share&_r=0).

<sup>24</sup> Steve Saideman, "Irredentism is Not the Only Inconsistent Thing in IR." March 8, 2014. <http://saideman.blogspot.com/2014/03/irredentism-is-not-only-inconsistent.html>. (Accessed 14 May, 2014).

<sup>25</sup> Jonathan Paquin, *A Stability-Seeking Power: U.S. Foreign Policy and Secessionist Conflicts* (Ithaca: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2010), 182-183.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 30.



## Contentious Politics

To begin an examination of Al-Hiraak through the lens of contentious politics, it is helpful to examine the development of social movement theory. This approach should start with some of the earliest thoughts on the drivers and characteristics of social movements, indicate the gaps present in these fields, and explain how they have led to the broader field of contentious politics.

Herbert Blumer, an American pioneer in social research, began addressing the idea of collective behavior as a whole as a factor of grievances. Traditionally, scholars have examined collective behavior as being a result of either deprivation or social marginalization. Deprivation is generally defined as poverty or the denial of political rights, and is particularly linked with collective behavior when it is relative to another rival group. Social marginalization occurs when a portion of the population becomes somehow disconnected from meaningful relationships with other people, and the social and political institutions upon which they have come to rely.<sup>28</sup> An historical example of this is given in De Tocqueville's explanation of the French Revolution. He saw the cause of the revolution as a mix of both structural and (French) cultural determinants. The regime's centralization of power and authority stripped the aristocracy and other groups of their societal functions, and effectively reduced them to the level of parasitic burdens on society.<sup>29</sup> This example showed how both deprivation of previous power and marginalization within society allowed the growth of a revolutionary movement. However, this older explanation of the roots of collective behavior downplays the importance of many other factors that play a big role in whether or not a movement gains traction.

Social unrest plays a role in motivating social movements as well. Post World War II theorists such as Durkheim, Hoffer, and Kornhauser believed that social movements themselves could be driven by feelings of alienation and social disorganization.<sup>30</sup> This unrest often develops slowly as a result of the

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<sup>28</sup> Gemma Edwards, *Social Movements and Protest*, (London: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 14-15.

<sup>29</sup> Sidney Tarrow, *Strangers at the Gates: Movements and States in Contentious Politics* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 14.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 17.

traditional grievances that are thought to be behind collective behavior. But Blumer sees social unrest as a sort of ‘background’ to the rise of collective behavior, rather than a direct cause. He believes that it is not until individuals who serve as agitators stir up enough dissatisfaction among a population, or some sort of significant ‘disruptive event’ occurs to jar people loose from their customary way of thinking that collective behavior begins to take hold.<sup>31</sup>

Other scholars see a society more as a living system, full of interrelated parts and necessary interactions that work together to meet the needs of the system as a whole, rather than simply seeing it in terms of group interactions. Neil Smelser, an emeritus professor of Sociology at the University of California, Berkeley, follows this ‘structural fundamentalism’ view, and as such places more value in examining social movements and collective behavior as a function of tensions and issues that arise in the social structure of society.<sup>32</sup> Therefore he sees collective behavior not as a result of grievances, but instead as an indication that some aspect of society needs to change. He believes that these beliefs are a result of more than a simple cause-effect relationship outlined by Blumer, and acknowledges that collective behavior is a result of multiple causal factors.<sup>33</sup> This indication that social movements and collective behavior emerge from the interaction of numerous factors and inputs continues to be explored through the literature.

Eminent American sociologists J.D. McCarthy and Mayer Zald pioneered the Resource Mobilization Theory, (RMT) which indicates that grievances and societal unrest alone are insufficient to explain social movements. Groups require the ‘means’ by which to act if they want to enact change.<sup>34</sup> These resources may be tangible (money, participants, leaders) or intangible (skills, public support), but the acquisition of these resources helps explain the success or failure of social movements, as well as to

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<sup>31</sup> Edwards, 18-19.

<sup>32</sup> Tarrow, 17.

<sup>33</sup> Edwards, 33-35.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 43.

partially define their function and operation.<sup>35</sup> Together they focused almost completely on the organizations themselves, giving great credit to the structural, organizational, and behavioral facets of organizations, but paid less attention to what the movements actually do.<sup>36</sup>

RMT draws a lot of support from Rational Action Theory (RAT), which would indicate that participants join social movements out of a rational decision-making process rather than an irrational jump to emotionally charged action. Because social movements usually operate outside of the political system, their resources are scarce and costs high. They must work to maximize the benefits they can achieve from the limited resources available.<sup>37</sup> RAT brings the discussion of costs, benefits, and interests into the field of social movements, and provides room to discuss the idea of collective action problems.

Gerald Marwell and Pamela E. Oliver define collective action as action that is undertaken by two or more individuals in pursuit of collective goods, or public benefits gained through action.<sup>38</sup> Because these goods are public in nature, and arguably any individual contribution to the action is minimal, there emerges what is called the collective action problem. Since the goods are public, and because the costs of contributing far outweigh the benefits of enjoying the goods as a free rider, RAT indicates that it would be rational for individuals to abstain from supporting a social movement, and enjoy the fruits of the movement as a non-actor.<sup>39</sup> Previous scholarship indicates that emotion and ideology are both irrational and insufficient to invoke participation, so Mancur Olson and others infer that there are certain conditions that must be present in order to make participation in a movement attractive to a rational actor.<sup>40</sup> Participation in collective action generally comes through one or more of three possible conditions: social sanctions, selective incentives, and critical mass.

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<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 44-45.

<sup>36</sup> Tarrow, 20.

<sup>37</sup> Edwards, 47-48.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 49.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 50-52.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 53.

Mancur Olson and Anthony Oberschall, leaders in the field of social conflict and social movements, both advance the idea that removing the possibility of free riding is essential to ensuring participation in collective action. Olsen focuses on social sanctions at a larger scale, such as making union membership a requirement for employment in certain shops, while Oberschall puts more weight in interpersonal coercion through social pressure and face-to-face contact.<sup>41</sup>

Another method suggested by Olsen involves the use of selective incentives to coax individuals into contribution. The use of selective incentives has a number of supporters in the field, many of whom define the benefits differently. Clark and Wilson see the use of selective incentives as ‘positive inducements’ because they allow individuals to pursue their preferences for social change only through direct participation.<sup>42</sup> Zald and Ash, however, believe that the inherent difficulty in achieving social change, especially on a short timeline, removes much of this potential incentive. They generally see social movements relying on secondary selective incentives, such as paying individuals to participate, or providing some other material discount for participation.<sup>43</sup> Others such as Wilson and Jasper see a more psychological incentive to participation, such as winning the approval of friends, social interaction, and the importance of participation.<sup>44</sup>

Finally, Marwell and Oliver take a position somewhat contrary to Olson’s claim surrounding the difficulty of coaxing participation in collective action. Marwell and Oliver believe that social movements do not need mass participation from everyone who stands to benefit from the desired change. Instead, they say, the movement just needs a ‘critical mass’ of a few motivated and resourceful actors who decide to work together for change. Once this critical mass begins action, more and more individuals will choose to join because it appears that the movement stands a chance of success.<sup>45</sup> This thought is similar to that

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<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 53.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 54.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

of Lenin, who believed that the problems of collective action could be fixed through the creation of an elite ‘vanguard’ of professional revolutionaries who would essentially set the conditions that would then attract the rest of the population into the movement.<sup>46</sup>

The Political Process Theory (PPT) is a reaction to the RMT, which states that a movement requires certain resources in order to be successful. Understanding that grievances, emotion, and desire are simply not enough to engage collective action, the PPT states that a ‘favorable’ political context is essential for the development of a social movement.<sup>47</sup> Put simply, a social movement must pop up when the time is right. The resource, in this case, is the space provided by a favorable political context. These arguments are inherently structural in nature, as they view the existing political system that a potential social movement hopes to operate within as an established, almost immovable object. Charles Tilley, Doug McAdam, and Sidney Tarrow are among the leading proponents of the PPT. They all concur that conditions must be right in order for collective action to take root, albeit with slightly different foci. They focus specifically on the political argument because, as they see it, social movements have developed alongside the political processes that dominate the modern world. Thus these movements are reliant upon these same political processes for their success or failure.<sup>48</sup>

Sidney Tarrow believes that favorable political conditions are best defined as political opportunities for action that give social movements a shot at having their voices heard. McAdam believes that the political environment becomes favorable when it presents clues to the potential challenger that the time is right, such as a fall from grace of a popular leader or political party. And Tilley focuses his theories on the idea of a challenge as an opportunity, stating that those factors that threaten a group’s interest are precisely those that provide the group a chance to act on behalf of their interests.<sup>49</sup> He sees

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<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

<sup>46</sup> Tarrow, 10.

<sup>47</sup> Edwards, 80.

<sup>48</sup> Edwards, 82.

much of the impetus behind social movements in the interaction between contention and changes in political regimes, as well as the broad influence of both political conflict and regime change.<sup>50</sup> This is not too far removed from the original thoughts of Marx and Engels, who believed that collective action was bound to occur when a social class comes into fully developed contradiction with its antagonists.<sup>51</sup> The difference between these two ideas is that Tilley seeks to explore how this friction helps shape social movements, while Marx and Engels simply see the friction as a necessary ingredient of collective action.

These same three scholars later moved beyond the basics of PPT, acknowledging the need for a more dynamic analysis of social movements. They realized that there needed to be more focus on the interactions among the varied factors addressed by other scholars. In doing so they coined the field of contentious politics, which they initially defined as: "...episodic, public, collective interaction among makers of claims and their objects when (a) at least one government is a claimant, an object of claims, or a party to the claims and (b) the claims would, if realized, affect the interests of at least one of the claimants."<sup>52</sup> This definition perfectly fits the relationship between Al-Hiraak and the government of Yemen, and recognizes just how important the interaction between the two is to understanding the growth of the movement.

This is a new approach to understanding social movements for two main reasons. First, it significantly broadens the range of political contention beyond simple social movements, to include revolutions, wars, ethnic conflicts, and other episodes in which a challenger and a state collide. Second, it focuses less on the conditions that previous approaches use to explain their claims, and more on the processes that shape social movement mobilization and dynamics.<sup>53</sup> However it does so at the expense of

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<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

<sup>50</sup> Tarrow, 21.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., 9.

<sup>52</sup> Doug McAdam, Sidney Tarrow, and Charles Tilley, *Dynamics of Contention* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 5.

<sup>53</sup> Edwards, 106.

examining the broader relations among movements, parties, and states.<sup>54</sup> The proponents of contentious politics saw three main mechanisms that determine the processes that ultimately shape social movements. McAdam, Tarrow, and Tilley define these mechanisms into three broad categories: environmental, dispositional, and relational.

Environmental mechanisms are those externally generated influences on the conditions that affect social life, such as the effect of resource availability on the capacity to engage in contentious politics. Dispositional mechanisms involve altering individual and collective perceptions, while relational mechanisms alter the connections between people, groups, and interpersonal networks.<sup>55</sup>

McAdam et al tie the interaction of these mechanisms up in what they call processes, which are defined as “...frequently recurring causal chains, sequences, and combinations of mechanisms.”<sup>56</sup> These dynamic processes give birth to new political actors, identities, and forms of action during complex episodes of contention.<sup>57</sup> This is the basis of the study of contentious politics, and what differentiates it from other research on social movements. Rather than focusing on individual actors, variables, or outcomes, contentious politics attempts to examine the multiplicity of interaction and evolution between actors.

Tarrow later updated his definition of contentious politics to explain that “[contentious politics] emerges in response to changes in political opportunities and threats when participants perceive and respond to a variety of incentives: material and ideological, partisan and group-based, long-standing and episodic. Building on these opportunities, and using known repertoires of action, people with limited resources can act together contentiously – if only sporadically.”<sup>58</sup> This modified definition allows for the

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<sup>54</sup> Tarrow, 21.

<sup>55</sup> McAdam et al., *Dynamics*, 25-26.

<sup>56</sup> McAdam et al., 27.

<sup>57</sup> McAdam et al., 38.

<sup>58</sup> Tarrow, 16.

inclusion of many previous elements used in the analysis of social movements, without ignoring the idea that some sort of mechanism is key to the emergence of contentious politics.

In 2009, McAdams, Tarrow and Tilley further fleshed out their thoughts on contentious politics. They sought to better define some of the mechanisms and processes they see as central to the field. By breaking down many case studies used as systematic examples of political processes, McAdams et al identified five specific mechanisms that can be further examined in an attempt to better understand contentious politics. These mechanisms include brokerage, identity shift, co-optation, diffusion, and repression.

The first mechanism they highlight is brokerage. Brokerage occurs when new connections develop between formerly unconnected sites. It is of value to the study of contentious politics because these new connections lower the cost of communication and coordination for movements, and also provides for increased access to resources and support.<sup>59</sup>

In a similar manner, the mechanism called identity shift occurs when individuals who previously self-identified as members of distinct social roles come together to create a new, usually temporary, identity. This new identity helps define the “us-them” distinction (through a mechanization called boundary formation) that is essential for demarcating the boundaries between elements in contentious politics.<sup>60</sup>

Co-optation occurs when a previously excluded political actor is incorporated into some center of power.<sup>61</sup> This can happen intentionally, for example via government recognition of the legitimacy of a movement, or unintentionally as a result of mechanisms such as brokerage and diffusion. Diffusion is defined as the spread of a contentious performance, issue, or interpretive frame from one site to another. It

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<sup>59</sup> Doug McAdam, Sidney Tarrow, and Charles Tilley, “Comparative Perspectives on Contentious Politics,” in *Comparative Politics: Rationality, Culture, and Structure* ed. Mark Irving Lichbach and Alan S. Zuckerman (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 274.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid.



is what allows local episodes to become national issues, and national issues to achieve international recognition.<sup>62</sup>

Finally, the mechanism of repression, defined as actions by authorities that increase the cost of an actor's claim making, is often a significant threat to movements.<sup>63</sup> Repression tends to stiffen resistance by well-organized, targeted communities, and discourages diffusion and mobilization by other parties.<sup>64</sup>

Taken together, these mechanisms highlighted in contentious politics lend themselves directly to the current situation in Yemen. As McAdam et al indicate, governments alter their organizations, policies, and priorities in response to their participation in contentious politics.<sup>65</sup> Just as important, the government itself helps to shape the interactions in contentious politics. The situation in Yemen is more than just a social movement – it is a series of mechanisms and processes that have played out in broad strokes through the process of the National Dialogue Committee and subsequent decision to enact a federal system in Yemen. Through a series of interactions with Al-Hiraak over issues of southern mistreatment, the government of Yemen has agreed to literally alter its basic composition and to provide increased autonomy for subnational regions. Al-Hiraak has likewise altered some of its priorities, as it has downplayed the demand for secession and actively participated in the NDC.

### **Yemen Case Study**

In order to explain the utility of social movement theory, specifically through the use of contentious politics, in explaining the birth and development of Al-Hiraak, it is necessary to undergo a brief analysis of the history of Yemen. This analysis will outline the historical events that led to the development of the movement, and indicate how the theory of contentious politics can both explain the

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<sup>62</sup> Ibid., 274-275.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid., 275.

<sup>64</sup> McAdam et al., *Dynamics*, 69.

<sup>65</sup> McAdam et al., "Comparative Perspectives," 263.

movement's past trajectory, and finally provide some predictive capabilities for its future. It will also identify some trends that can help explain the likely effects of federalization on the movement, and on the security situation in Yemen.

A close examination of the history of Al-Hiraak includes visible effects of two major themes in contentious politics – repression and co-optation. Government repression, and the subsequent reaction of both Al-Hiraak, and other protest elements, largely shaped the growth and expansion of the movement. Co-optation through deliberate inclusion in the National Dialog Council (NDC) is likely to shape its future. In order to explain how these themes play out in the formation and expansion of Al-Hiraak, it is necessary to review the fractious history of Yemen that led to the movement's development.

The recent history of Yemen, like most of the Middle East, bears the mark of 20<sup>th</sup> century colonialism. The north/south split dates back to a 1904 treaty between the British and Ottoman empires dividing influence in the region amongst themselves. After World War I the gap widened, as a Zaydi imam replaced the Ottomans in the north, and the Sunni in the south strengthened their ties with the British Empire.<sup>66</sup> North and South Yemen remained relatively stable for the next several decades, until a military coup overturned the government in the North in 1962, establishing the Yemen Arab Republic. A civil war followed the coup and was eventually settled in 1967 with an agreement that strongly favored religious and tribal elites.<sup>67</sup> In the meantime, South Yemen grew away from the British Empire, and gained its independence in 1967 after four years of guerilla war against their colonial rulers.<sup>68</sup> Shortly after their independence, Marxists came to power in the South, and the ideological differences between the People's Democratic Republic of Yemen and the Yemen Arab Republic helped fuel two more brief wars over border disputes in 1972 and 1979.<sup>69</sup>

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<sup>66</sup> Day, "Yemen: On The Brink," 3.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid., 4.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid.

<sup>69</sup> Sarah Phillips, "Yemen," in *The Middle East*, edited by Ellen Lust (Washington: CQ Press, 2011), 766.

Despite a history of shared conflict, the leadership of the Yemen Arab Republic and People's Democratic Republic of Yemen continued to discuss the prospect of unification. The discovery of oil in the Yemen Arab Republic near the border undoubtedly encouraged both sides to find a mutually beneficial agreement for future interaction.<sup>70</sup> The biggest step towards unification came in 1988, when the presidents of both nations met to discuss the establishment of an economic buffer zone and other means to diffuse tension on the border.<sup>71</sup>

President Saleh, the head of the Yemen Arab Republic, also saw unification as a chance to increase both his personal power and to secure a place in history as the leader who successfully united Yemen.<sup>72</sup> The two countries finally united on May 22, 1990. Because the North included the vast majority of the population of Yemen, Sana'a became the capital of the newly formed country. The unification agreement attempted to balance political power between the north and south, dividing up the ministries and placing the leader of the Yemeni Socialist Party (YSP) into the office of the vice president under Saleh, who remained the head of newly united nation.<sup>73</sup> Oddly, the two militaries never fully integrated. Although some senior commanders and individual units were exchanged across the former border, there remained two distinctly separate militaries in Yemen. This situation was not rectified until the end of the 1994 civil war.<sup>74</sup>

Despite these hasty efforts to balance power, the unification of Yemen brought with it some significant issues. Chief among these issues was the misbalance of power towards the executive branch. The executive authority of the government was made up of a five-person body, three of which were from

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<sup>70</sup> Day, "Yemen: On The Brink," 4.

<sup>71</sup> Phillips, "Yemen," 767.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid.

<sup>73</sup> Day, "Yemen: On The Brink," 4.

<sup>74</sup> Phillips, "Yemen," 767.

the north, and two from the south.<sup>75</sup> This allowed President Saleh and his northern partners to exert undue influence on state matters, a fault that significantly contributed to future debacles.

Beyond the formal political processes that favored the north and threatened the stability of the newly formed country, informal patterns of behavior also caused friction between the north and the south. Under decades of British colonial rule, and under the subsequent Marxist government of the liberated People's Democratic Republic of Yemen, the people of the south grew accustomed to a fairly legitimate, functioning government. They were shocked by the levels of corruption and nepotism engrained in Saleh's administration, and as a whole unprepared to compete in such an environment.<sup>76</sup>

Not long after the initial unification, these political stressors came to a head in Yemen. The first national election, held in 1993, resulted in a painful political stalemate as northern and southern parties all failed to win a national majority or to establish a dominating presence in parliament. Strong regional performances by Saleh's General People's Congress (GPC) in the north and the YSP in the south led to demands from YSP leaders for a federal system that would grant them decentralized political power to rule in the south. Saleh and the GPC equated any call for federal status as the first step towards succession, and adamantly rejected these requests.<sup>77</sup>

Despite an attempt by King Hussein of Jordan to diffuse the situation through the signing of an official Document of Pledge and Accord (DPA), tensions continued to mount between the north and the south.<sup>78</sup> During the struggles more than 100 YSP politicians were assassinated, allegedly by returning veterans from the Soviet-Afghan war working at the behest of the Saleh regime.<sup>79</sup> In April 1994 the situation eventually devolved into a brief civil war, where the still-unincorporated northern and southern

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<sup>75</sup> Day, "Yemen: On The Brink," 4.

<sup>76</sup> Susanne Dahlgren, "The Snake with a Thousand Heads: The Southern Cause in Yemen," *Middle East Report* no. 256 (Fall 2010): 32

<sup>77</sup> Day, "Yemen: On The Brink," 5.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid.

<sup>79</sup> Dahlgren, "The Snake with a Thousand Heads," 29.

armies clashed in a series of engagements across the country. The war ended on July 7, 1994 when the northern army sacked the port city of Aden, forcing most of the YSP leadership to flee the country.<sup>80</sup>

The outcome of the 1994 civil war arguably provided much of the friction that eventually led to the rise of Al-Hiraak as a political movement. In the aftermath of the war and the exodus of senior YSP leadership, the party found itself significantly weakened and ineffective. The YSP chose to boycott the 1997 parliamentary elections in protest against Saleh and his leadership, but their absence only allowed the GPC to secure a clear majority in parliament. This majority gave them the opportunity to sever its coalition with another major political party, and effectively assume complete control of the government.<sup>81</sup> This majority, combined with the peculiarities of the Yemeni governmental institutions that heavily favor the power of the executive, allowed President Saleh to exercise more and more authoritarian power over the country.<sup>82</sup> This political domination of the north under Saleh set the stage for the systematic repression of southern interests that helped birth Al-Hiraak.

A political toll was not the only loss faced by the south following the civil war in 1994. After the conflict, many well-connected northerners moved into the south to capitalize on the chaotic situation in the region. They occupied homes of former YSP leaders, filled government positions, and dominated the resource extraction industry.<sup>83</sup> These “carpetbaggers” from the north took great liberties with southern property and land, and their actions contributed significantly to southern dissent.<sup>84</sup>

The southern regions of Yemen chafed under the repression of the government for the next decade. Their widespread discontent began to take political form in 2007. That year, a large number of former southern military officers, forced into retirement after the 1994 civil war, began campaigning for

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<sup>80</sup> Ibid.

<sup>81</sup> Gamal Gasim, “Explaining Political Activism in Yemen,” in *Taking to the Streets: The Transformation of Arab Activism* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2014), 118-119.

<sup>82</sup> Phillips, “Yemen,” 770; Gasim, “Explaining Political Activism in Yemen,” 119.

<sup>83</sup> Day, “Yemen: On The Brink,” 6.

<sup>84</sup> Clark, *Yemen*, 141.

work opportunities and political reforms for the south.<sup>85</sup> These former officers, saddled with marginal pensions and little or no job opportunities, write a series of formal letters to the Saleh government requesting official assistance to help rectify the ongoing issues in their region. When their petitions were rejected, the former military officers organized a series of peaceful political demonstrations.<sup>86</sup> This movement became known as *al Hiraak al-janubi*, which loosely translates to “The Southern Movement.”

Because of the widespread dissatisfaction with the status quo in southern Yemen, the movement quickly grew beyond its initial core of former military officers. Their peaceful demonstrations attracted other activist elements among the youth and the YSP.<sup>87</sup> As the peaceful protests grew in size, they began to attract attention from the government of Yemen. Rather than attempting to address the protester’s concerns, Saleh’s regime began an increasingly violent campaign to break up the organization.

A turning point for the movement came on October 14, 2007. On that day, Yemeni security forces shot and killed four men protesting in the streets of Aden. This was particularly poignant for southern Yemenis, as October 14<sup>th</sup> is a celebrated holiday commemorating the death of seven young protesters during demonstrations against British colonial rule in 1963.<sup>88</sup> Following that event, the size and scale of Al-Hiraak protests increased significantly, as did the violent repression of the Saleh regime. In response to the heavy-handed repression from the Saleh regime, Al-Hiraak demands eventually shifted from broad economic and political reforms for the south to a call for complete succession and the reestablishment of a separate southern state.<sup>89</sup> This provides a clear example of how government attempts to increase the cost of claim-making through repressive tactics can, rather than dissuading further action, actually stiffen the resistance of the targeted organization.

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<sup>85</sup> Gasim, “Explaining Political Activism in Yemen,” 121.

<sup>86</sup> Dahlgren, “The Snake with a Thousand Heads,” 28.

<sup>87</sup> Gasim, “Explaining Political Activism in Yemen,” 121.

<sup>88</sup> Day, “Yemen: On The Brink,” 9.

<sup>89</sup> Ibid., 122.

Although Al-Hiraak had many potential allies in north Yemen amongst those tired of the brutal, corrupt government, it failed to gain significant traction in that region of the country. The initial grievances that drive the formation of the organization are well recognized throughout the country, and many northerners also felt slighted by the Saleh regime during his reign. But Al-Hiraak's adamant desire for secession, coupled with a disjointed organization that lacked strong, unified leadership, prevented them from potentially larger gains in the north.<sup>90</sup>

In January 2011 Yemen experienced its own version of the Arab Spring uprisings, as young activists began marching and demonstrating in support of the Tunisian efforts that eventually ousted Zine El Abidine Ben Ali. Faced again with immediate initial repression from the Saleh regime, the protests quickly diffused across the country, demanding political reforms and a change of presidential leadership. Although the initial spark for these protests came from events in Tunisia and Egypt, the form and execution of the protests drew significantly from the rise of Al-Hiraak several years earlier. These new protests largely consisted of empowered youth activists, unaffiliated with any particular political party, but aware that civil protests had the potential to bring about significant political reform.<sup>91</sup>

Much like the roots of Al-Hiraak, the Arab Spring protests in Yemen attracted a very broad base of organizations calling for political change in the country. While the initial root of the movement largely came from unaffiliated youth activists, it quickly grew to include dozens of other elements. Many of these elements were overtly political or ideological, such as a bloc aligned with the Zaydi interests in the north, Nasserists, Socialist organizations, and members of Islah, an islamist-based political organization.<sup>92</sup> Elements of Al-Hiraak also participated in the Arab Spring protests, adding yet another political dimension to the fray.

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<sup>90</sup> Ibid.

<sup>91</sup> Gasim, "Explaining Political Activism in Yemen," 110.

<sup>92</sup> Laurent Bonnefoy and Marine Poirier, "Dynamics of the Yemeni Revolution," in *Social Movements, Mobilization, and Contestation in the Middle East and North Africa*, edited by Joel Beinin and Frederic Vairel (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2013), 236.

In the face of increasingly heavy-handed repression from the Saleh regime, the Arab Spring protests continued gaining momentum and popularity in Yemen. Just as one particularly shocking instance of government repression served to significantly stiffen Al-Hiraak resistance in 2007, the Arab Spring movement in Yemen after a shockingly violent event. In March 2011 security forces opened fire on a crowd of protesters, killing fifty-two unarmed people. This event proved to be a turning point in the movement. Fed up with the increasingly authoritarian actions of President Saleh, many senior military figures defected to join the protests.<sup>93</sup>

Shortly thereafter, the ruling GPC and larger opposition parties negotiated an agreement through the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC). This agreement was finalized in November 2011 and allowed Saleh to step down from power peacefully, to be replaced by his vice president, in exchange for immunity against any charges of abuse during the protests.<sup>94</sup> The initiative also allowed for the formation of a National Dialogue Committee (NDC) intended to bring together the various regional and political factions of Yemen in order to agree on the formation of a new government. The NDC exposed elements of Al-Hiraak to legitimate centers of governmental power, an opportunity that they had been largely excluded from in the past. The exposure of previously excluded political actors to centers of power often leads to co-optation, where that actor's demands tend to soften over time.

Even though it successfully removed President Saleh from power, Al-Hiraak largely did not support the GCC initiative. In an attempt to secure some legitimate political power for the protesters, the initiative included a provision that the new government be shared equally between the ruling GPC and the opposition parties. However much of Al-Hiraak believed that this provision completely ignored their core demand, their desire to separate wholly from the north and reestablish an independent south Yemen. This exposed some serious divisions within the movement itself, as those who demanded secession openly

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<sup>93</sup> Bonnefoy and Poirier, "Dynamics," 241.

<sup>94</sup> Bonnefoy and Poirier, "Dynamics," 241-242.



clashed in February 2012 with elements who believed that their main grievances could be addressed under the auspices of a Yemen united under a new government.<sup>95</sup>

Despite these internal divisions, some members of Al-Hiraak continued to participate in the NDC. The NDC established a special committee, known as the “8+8” committee, to specifically negotiate an agreement with Al-Hiraak over their grievances. This committee, made up of eight senior leaders from the north and eight from the south, proved to be essential in reaching a consensus that is acceptable to both Al-Hiraak and the rest of the NDC.<sup>96</sup> Thanks in no small part to the work of this committee, the NDC announced in February 2014 Yemen would transform into a six-region federal system. The six-region agreement addressed the majority of southern desires for increased autonomy, and also assuaged northern fears that a two-federation split along north-south lines would merely be a precursor to full independence for the south in the near future.<sup>97</sup>

As demonstrated above, the root cause behind Al-Hiraak grew out of northern repression of southern interests following the 1994 civil war. Saleh and the GPC overwhelmingly dominated the political scene, using executive power to marginalize all other political opponents and parties. This repression took many forms – political, social, economic, and even reached into the military ranks. Following the conclusion of the civil war, President Saleh forced significant portions of the former South Yemen army to retire under unfavorable circumstances. These former officers were unable to find new employment, and received only paltry recompense for their years of prior service. In 2007 they began the protest campaign that eventually grew into Al-Hiraak. Government repression of Al-Hiraak, especially in incidents like the October 14, 2007 massacre by government forces, only served to strengthen the movement’s resolve and widen its recruiting base.

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<sup>95</sup> Gasim, “Explaining Political Activism in Yemen,” 128-129.

<sup>96</sup> Rafat Al-Akhali, “Debating Federalism in Yemen,” *Yemen Times*, November 7, 2013, accessed May 13, 2014, <http://www.yementimes.com/en/1753/opinion/3452/Will-decentralization-in-Yemen-marginalize-citizens.htm>.

<sup>97</sup> “Yemen to Become Six-Region Federation,” Naharnet Newsdesk, February 10, 2014, accessed 31 July 2014, <http://www.naharnet.com/stories/en/118033-yemen-to-become-six-region-federation>.

Al-Hiraak played both a direct and indirect role in the 2011 Arab Springs uprisings in Yemen. Indirectly they served as an influence for the movement as a result of their years of political protest and action. Directly they took part in many of the major protests, joining up with other protest groups that shared their dislike for the current regime. They suffered the same violent repression as the other Arab Springs elements, and again found their resolve hardened and support widened. It was exactly this heavy-handed government repression that led to the intervention of the GCC, the removal of Saleh, and the establishment of the NDC that eventually enacted the six-region federal system.

The deliberate inclusion of Al-Hiraak in the NDC exposed what had been a politically marginalized movement to previously inaccessible elements of power. This exposure to power fundamentally alters protest movements, often changing them from movements to mere interest groups.<sup>98</sup> The groups find that, once they are provided a measure of legitimate power, they are able to address many of their driving issues. While the outcomes are generally not as extreme as the core of the movement may desire, they are often sufficient to satisfy the rank-and-file. Once the major issues are at least partially addressed, the movement finds itself less in the role of a protest organization and more in the role of an advocate for continued power.

The gradual softening of Al-Hiraak demands during their participation at the NDC helps show the effects of co-optation brought about by the opportunity to participate legitimately in the formation of a new government. At the beginning of the talks, the Al-Hiraak agenda called for independence based on pre-unification borders.<sup>99</sup> As late as October 2013, Yemeni political analysts predicted that the NDC would collapse because Al-Hiraak continued to demand full independence.<sup>100</sup> As the talks continued, however, Al-Hiraak's tone began to change. A rift developed within the movement, as some members realized that the NDC presented an opportunity to positively shape their future, even if it did not include

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<sup>98</sup> McAdam et al., "Comparative Perspectives," 274-275.

<sup>99</sup> Al-Akhali, "Debating Federalism."

<sup>100</sup> Sadeq Al-Wesabi, "ICG: Imposing Settlement on South Will Lead to Breakdown," *Yemen Times*, November 8, 2013, accessed May 13, 2014, <http://www.aswancenter.com/nprint.php?sid=258>.

full independent status. The movement even reorganized its internal mechanisms to better represent the needs of its constituency in the light of this opportunity.<sup>101</sup>

Following this fracture, Al-Hiraak announced that it would be willing to discuss options for the creation of a federal system in Yemen, essentially tabling the cry for independence. Their initial terms demanded a two-region federal state, again drawn along the pre-unification lines. These terms remained a sticking point at the NDC, as many feared that a two-region federal system would merely set the stage for complete independence of the southern region in the near future.<sup>102</sup> Faced with another potential stalemate and eager to pursue a workable solution, the chairman of Al-Hiraak, Mohammed Ali Ahmed, announced that the party ruled out the demands for a two-region federal state in late October 2013.<sup>103</sup> This decision ultimately set the stage for the final agreement on the creation of a six-region federal state, announced in January 2014. This final agreement addressed many of the concerns that originally drove Al-Hiraak to call for independence, gave them a legitimate voice in the government, and provided them access to power that had been denied to them for years.

The mechanics of co-optation help explain how the NDC ultimately succeeded in brokering a deal among the many political and regional parties in Yemen, by providing them with access to power that eventually softens their core demands and provides legitimate opportunities for power. These same mechanics of co-optation also likely contain significant predictive power for the future of Al-Hiraak. Because Al Hiraak participated in the NDC, they were able to exercise new levels of political power. This new power played a significant role in the decision to move to a six-region federal system, a move that addresses, at least on some levels, many of the movement's core issues. Therefore it is likely that those members of Al-Hiraak who still strive for secession and full independence will slowly be marginalized

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<sup>101</sup> Al-Sakkaf, "The Real Story."

<sup>102</sup> Al-Akhali, "Will Decentralization in Yemen Marginalize Citizens?"

<sup>103</sup> Mohammed Al-Hassani, "Houthis to Resume Participation in NDC, Hirak Still Divided, Holding Back." *Yemen Times*, October 31, 2013, accessed May 13, 2014, <http://www.yementimes.com/en/1725/news/3070/Houthis-to-resume-participation-in-NDC-Hirak-still-divided-holding-back.htm>.

from the rest of the movement, who will be happy to exercise their newfound political influence in the federal system. Over time, the calls for independence are likely to die down, as its proponents will find fewer and fewer supporters among a population that no longer lives under the grievances that gave root to the movement.

### **Conclusion**

“Dealing with the Southern Movement simply as a security threat linked to the problem of terrorism, without addressing the underlying political problems that gave rise to it, can become a self-fulfilling prophecy.”

-Stephen Day, “The Political Challenge of Yemen’s Southern Movement”

Examining the history of Al-Hiraak via the factors of contentious politics provides interesting insight into the future security situation in Yemen. It highlights some of the counterintuitive effects that governmental repression and inclusion can have on the tractability of secession movements. These insights can help better inform future United States policy recommendations for interactions with secessionist movements, perhaps guiding decision-makers to recommend early negotiations with the groups, along with access to significant real political power in order to soften their calls for complete independence and the disorder that can follow the establishment of a new state in the world order. The study can help guide United States actions in the ongoing battle against Al-Qaeda affiliates in Yemen and beyond, by emphasizing the importance of providing effective governance to potentially disaffected populations, tempering the use of repressive actions in the face of upheaval, and by clarifying how these affiliates exploit the ‘space’ available when internal fragmentation and upheaval spread across a state.

In this case study the mechanics of repression served only to strengthen and sharpen the core movement, exactly the opposite of what the sitting government intended. The movement remained a significant threat to internal stability only so long as it was forbidden from holding any real political power. When Al-Hiraak received the opportunity to wield power and influence in the NDC, and became a legitimate agent in Yemen, they gained a real stake in the success of the political process. Consequently they modified their official agenda, distanced themselves from their most strident calls for secession, and

eventually supported the formation of a six-region federal system. Therefore, the mechanism of co-optation gave Al-Hiraak access to power they lacked in the past, and this access both tempered their demands and significantly lessened their threat to the internal stability of Yemen.

The future adaptation of a federal system in Yemen is likely to have a two-fold effect. First, as discussed above, the inclusion of Al-Hiraak in the new government and the increased autonomy brought about by the federal system should eliminate many of the significant regional issues that plague Yemen. While there are likely to be an uncomfortable period of transition of responsibilities from the central government to the regional states, in the long run this move should help quell much of the internal dissent in the country. This can allow the government to dedicate more time and effort to the ongoing Huthi rebellion in the north, a rebellion that now appears to be the biggest threat to a peaceful governmental transition following the conclusion of the NDC.<sup>104</sup>

#### Policy Recommendations for Secession Movements

Learning from this, policymakers may want to encourage the development of security and governance starting from somewhere other than the central government. Yemen, much like Afghanistan, is a country that does not have a history of a strong centralized power. Efforts to develop a strong centralized government may be misplaced at best, and counterproductive at worst. Concentrating assistance and power at a level that is unable to adequately address the governance needs of a nation may in fact only exacerbate existing internal problems, and allow internal divisions to fester. Governments then must often rely on repressive tactics in an attempt to control their populations and quell potential uprisings. The hardening of Al Hiraak's demands for secession in the face of heavy-handed government reactions show that this technique can backfire on a government. If, on the other hand, assistance efforts

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<sup>104</sup> "Conflict Alert: Unrest in Sanaa," International Crisis Group, September 8, 2014, accessed September 11, 2014, [http://www.crisisgroup.org/en/publication-type/alerts/2014/conflict-alert-unrest-in-sanaa.aspx?utm\\_source=yemen-alert&utm\\_medium=view&utm\\_campaign=mremail](http://www.crisisgroup.org/en/publication-type/alerts/2014/conflict-alert-unrest-in-sanaa.aspx?utm_source=yemen-alert&utm_medium=view&utm_campaign=mremail).

take a more decentralized focus, and encourage the host government to do the same, they can help assuage some of the friction between the population and the government before they lead to larger issues.

Second, the federal system will bring with it a requisite increase in regional autonomy and a decentralization of governmental power that will allow the regional governments to better meet the needs of their constituents. This increased ability to provide governance, combined with a general decrease in upheaval between the government and population is likely to significantly curtail AQAP's maneuver space in Yemen.<sup>105</sup> Therefore, the move to decentralize power from the central government may actually serve to better achieve United States interests in Yemen (reduction of threat from AQAP) than years of military aid and targeted interventions.

#### Implications for Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula

The history of Al Qaeda in Yemen predates that of Al Hiraak by nearly three decades. Immediately following the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979, Yemen began funneling fighters into the Arab organizations that fought alongside the Afghan mujahedeen. The young Yemeni fighters were officially recruited by the government of North Yemen, under President Saleh, to join the conflict. They also received encouragement and funding for their efforts through several prominent northern tribes, and through the network of Saudi-inspired mosques in the country.<sup>106</sup> These Arab organizations, eventually known as the Services Bureau, guided the massive numbers of volunteers through Pakistan and on to the front lines of the struggle in Afghanistan.

In the aftermath of the Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan and the subsequent chaos that erupted when the Mujahedeen no longer had a clear-cut enemy to hold together their difficult alliances, the Services Bureau also suffered the loss of its founding father and key leader. Abdullah Azzam, a Palestinian academic who eventually became the lynchpin of the Services Bureau, was assassinated in

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<sup>105</sup> "The Last Refuge: Yemen, Al Qaeda, and America's War in Arabia," New America Foundation, December 5, 2012, accessed September 9, 2014, [http://newamerica.net/events/2012/the\\_last\\_refuge](http://newamerica.net/events/2012/the_last_refuge).

<sup>106</sup> Gregory Johnsen, *The Last Refuge* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, Inc, 2013), 7-8.

November 1989. In the absence of his leadership and abilities, the Arabs still fighting in Afghanistan against the remnants of the Afghan Communist government fell into disarray. Much of the leadership retreated to Saudi Arabia, where under the influence and hospitality of Usama bin Laden they began a plot to rid the Muslim world of the remaining Communist threat in South Yemen.<sup>107</sup>

This timeline roughly coincides with that of the North/South Yemeni unification efforts. Many jihadists affiliated with bin Laden and his closest lieutenant in Yemen, Tariq al-Fadli, found safe haven in Yemen after leaving Afghanistan. President Saleh realizing that he may require assistance from the veteran fighters in upcoming post-unification struggles to control the south, welcomed their return.<sup>108</sup> These veteran fighters under Fadli played a significant role in the brief civil war in 1994, when they formed half of the pincer envelopment that isolated Aden and ultimately brought about the capitulation of the remnants of the Socialist party.<sup>109</sup>

Al Qaeda continued to enjoy the relative safe-haven that came from its unofficial affiliation with President Saleh and his gratitude for its support during the Yemeni civil war for the next several years. Their welcome began to wear thin after the attack on the *USS Cole* in February 2000, sparking a multi-year Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) investigation that strained the limits of US-Yemeni relations.<sup>110</sup> The aftermath of the September 11, 2001 attacks on the United States, however, brought with it a significant realignment of official Yemeni policy towards the United States and Al Qaeda.

In the immediate aftermath of the attack, Yemen's internal security apparatus allowed the FBI access to two prisoners that they had previously refused to allow to be interviewed. In less than three weeks, thanks to interviews with the two prisoners in question, FBI officials managed to definitively tie

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<sup>107</sup> Ibid., 12-18.

<sup>108</sup> W. Andrew Terrill, "The Struggle for Yemen and the Challenge of Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula," (Carlisle Barracks: United States Army Strategic Studies Institute, June 2013), 23.

<sup>109</sup> Johnson, *The Last Refuge*, 40-44.

<sup>110</sup> Ibid., 75-79.

the 9/11 hijackers to bin Laden and Al Qaeda.<sup>111</sup> Thanks in no small part to this gesture, Yemeni efforts to convince the United States of their intent to fully cooperate in the upcoming war on terror were successful. President Saleh himself took responsibility for the detention of several high level operatives wanted by the Central Intelligence Agency, and in 2002 he authorized United States drone strikes on key Al Qaeda targets in Yemen.<sup>112</sup>

According to several senior state department officials with significant experience in Yemen, by 2004 it appeared that the United States and Yemen had a handle on the Al Qaeda presence in Yemen. Targeting efforts, both by the United States and Yemen security forces, weakened the organization from the top, while a concerted series of development projects to increase governance and economic viability among the populations most heavily recruited by Al Qaeda diminished their support base.<sup>113</sup> It is worth noting that Yemen's early cooperation in the aftermath of 9/11 unlocked nearly \$400 million of United States aid and stimulus loans, assistance that had been frozen since 1990 when Yemen refused to support the UN Security Council vote supporting the resolution in favor of the Gulf War.<sup>114</sup>

During this time the United States shifted focus from Yemen to Iraq after what seemed like a successful campaign against Al Qaeda, Yemen pivoted its attention northwards to the growing Huthi rebellion. This opening, combined with a significant crackdown on Al Qaeda affiliates in Saudi Arabia, allowed for a resurgence of the organization in Yemen in 2006-2007. Among the most significant events of this resurgence was a prison break in 2006 in which 23 senior Al Qaeda operatives, including the two whose interrogation in 2001 allowed the FBI to definitively link the 9/11 attacks to Al-Qaeda, escaped in

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<sup>111</sup> Ibid., 85-88.

<sup>112</sup> Terrill, "The Struggle for Yemen," 24; Johnsen 90-91, 123.

<sup>113</sup> Azmat Khan, "Understanding Yemen's Al Qaeda Threat," May 29, 2019, accessed September 9, 2014, <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/foreign-affairs-defense/al-qaeda-in-yemen/understanding-yemens-al-qaeda-threat/>.

<sup>114</sup> Johnsen, *The Last Refuge*, 27, 92.



what appeared to be an ‘inside job.’<sup>115</sup> The group of escapees also contained Nasir al-Wihayshi, a Yemeni who served for many years as bin Laden’s personal secretary and aide-de-camp, and in 2009 became the leader of the newly organized Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP).<sup>116</sup>

The rebirth of Al Qaeda in Yemen and their consolidation into AQAP with elements from Saudi Arabia roughly coincides with the development of Al Hiraak and its growth from a small group of former army officers to a series of statewide protests. From early in their existence, the government of Yemen accused Al-Hiraak of maintaining ties to AQAP. These alleged ties helped justify some of the more violent methods used by the government of Yemen to repress the movement.<sup>117</sup> While it is true that in 2009 the head of AQAP, Nasser al-Wahayshi, declared support for the movement, the leaders of Al-Hiraak roundly rejected any association with al-Wahayshi and his organization. Senior members also repeatedly spoke out against any violent action by Al-Hiraak, in part to avoid any possible association with fundamentalist groups like AQAP in the south and the Huthi in the north.<sup>118</sup> Moreover, the broad ideological base of support for Al Hiraak, which includes disparate elements such as former southern military officers, members of the YSP, and even former Afghan jihadis such as Tariq al-Fadli who fought side-by-side with the GPC against the YSP during the Yemeni civil war indicate that the movement has no ties with ideological thinking. Such a broad coalition could only be unified by a desire to escape the control of Saleh and improve the quality of life for southern Yemen.<sup>119</sup>

AQAP capitalized the unrest spurred by the Arab Springs protests in Yemen to expand their operations beyond facilitation of terrorist activities to attempts to control portions of territory. In effect, they sought to become a governing body with statelike capabilities, based on sharia law, that also

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<sup>115</sup> W. Andrew Terrill, “The Struggle for Yemen and the Challenge of Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula,” (Carlisle Barracks: United States Army Strategic Studies Institute, June 2013), 25-26.

<sup>116</sup> Terrill, “The Struggle for Yemen,” 32.

<sup>117</sup> Dahlgren, “The Snake with a Thousand Heads,” 30.

<sup>118</sup> Day, “Yemen: On The Brink,” 9.

<sup>119</sup> Dahlgren, “The Snake with a Thousand Heads,” 29-30.

sponsored terror activities.<sup>120</sup> Initial attempts to control swaths of territory in southern Yemen began before the first protests in Tunisia, but quickly accelerated when Yemeni security forces found themselves tied up with massive protests across the country.<sup>121</sup> These attempts to dominate territory and hold land brought them into more frequent contact with the population of southern Yemen, much of which was not receptive to AQAP's harsh methods or ideology. Despite attempts by AQAP to advertize their efforts in southern Yemen as supportive of the popular struggle against then-President Saleh, it quickly became clear to residents that their primary focus was the capture of land and resources in order to support their religious goals.<sup>122</sup> In an attempt to learn from previous mistakes made by affiliates in Iraq, some AQAP leaders sought to prevent losing the support of the population by improving AQAP's ability to provide governance and services to the regions they controlled. There are instances of AQAP emirs preaching about the importance of providing sewage services to the citizens under their control, and even of hiring teachers to fill vacancies at schools.<sup>123</sup>

In the wake of the new interim government under President Hadi and relative peace with the Huthis during the NDC, the Yemeni military embarked on a largely successful campaign to root out AQAP strongholds in southern Yemen. By the end of 2012, security forces and tribal militias had largely rooted out the AQAP strongholds in Abyan and Shabwa, despite stiff resistance, and largely driven the element back underground.<sup>124</sup> Despite the loss of their newly-controlled territories, AQAP remains a viable threat both to Yemen and to the international community. In light of their recent setbacks, AQAP leadership has learned from its failures. Recent AQAP messaging to other affiliates encourages them to gradually ease their religious views on the people whom they wish to control, and to be ready with strong

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<sup>120</sup> New America Foundation, "The Last Refuge."

<sup>121</sup> Terrill, "The Struggle for Yemen," 35-36.

<sup>122</sup> Tom Finn, "Yemen's Southern Rebels Emerge from the Shadows," *The Guardian*, November 11, 2011, accessed 12 September, 2014, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2011/nov/11/yemen-southern-rebels-hirak-secession>.

<sup>123</sup> New America Foundation, "The Last Refuge."

<sup>124</sup> Terrill, "The Struggle for Yemen," 46, 47.

governance capabilities as soon as they come to power in a region.<sup>125</sup> This shows that the organization is learning from previous failures and focusing future efforts more on gaining popular support than the simple exercise of brute power that has been used in the past.<sup>126</sup>

Looking back at the history of Al Qaeda in Yemen, it becomes clear that the organization has consistently leveraged the space made available between a centralized government that is largely unable to consistently project power and extend governance to its population. Early on, the forefathers of the organization exploited the friction in the newly unified state, and found a role working with Saleh's government to shore up his power and fight communist elements in the southern part of the country. They enjoyed a relative sort of safe haven in the country, even during some of their initial attacks on United States interests, until the massive shock of the 9/11 attacks inexorably altered the international political landscape, and Saleh was forced to throw in with United States' efforts against terrorist organizations.

Several years of concerted targeting by the government of Yemen and the United States essentially drove Al Qaeda from Yemen during the early years of the War on Terror. But once United States' efforts and attention shifted primarily to Iraq, the group again found its way back in to Yemen. Capitalizing on the distraction caused by the growing threat of the Huthi rebellion in the north, Al Qaeda leadership reestablished a significant presence in their old stronghold. During the recent turbulence caused by the Arab Springs and escalation of the secession movement in the south, AQAP took their presence a step further, and began actively controlling large swaths of territory. They targeted security forces, intimidated the population, and attempted to sell themselves as allies of those seeking redress against the government. Despite their efforts, they never fully gained the cooperation of large portions of the population. And once the government achieved some breathing room by deescalating conflict with the

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<sup>125</sup> Daniel Green, "Al-Qaeda's Shadow Government in Yemen," *The Washington Institute*, December 12, 2013, accessed September 10, 2014, <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/al-qaedas-shadow-government-in-yemen>.

<sup>126</sup> Ibid.

Huthis and entering into formal negotiations with Al Hiraak, it was able to recapture much of that territory from AQAP, often with the assistance of local tribal fighters.

This also indicates an awareness of a vulnerability that the government of Yemen, and United States policy, should seek to exploit. President Hadi and his government should continue to press the offensive against AQAP strongholds across Yemen, but must pair their military actions with visible efforts to provide aid and services to regions of the country that have long been neglected by the government. As the transition to a six state federal system continues, dissemination of aid and services may be complicated by new levels of bureaucracy; nevertheless efforts to promote governance and provide services to the citizens of Yemen will continue to shrink AQAP's recruiting base and deny them support.

#### Counterterrorism Policy Recommendations for Yemen and Beyond

The United States economic and military support to Yemen should likewise focus on advancing Yemeni efforts to combat AQAP through military training and supplies, and should strive to minimize the use of drone strikes against AQAP targets. Many experts agree that, while the drone strikes have successfully eliminated a significant number of AQAP leadership, they also serve as a strong recruiting tool for the organization. The strikes often kill unaffiliated civilians travelling or meeting with AQAP members, and tribal law often requires surviving family members to avenge their loss. These traditions, along with the significant press coverage of drone strikes in Yemen, make them a hazardous tool in the fight against AQAP.<sup>127</sup>

Economic aid can be used to encourage Yemen's government to continue efforts to spread governance and services to its citizens. However, this must be done with realistic expectations as to just how effective their government can be in pushing development. Rather than using United States personnel and resources, or relying on a government that is not fully able to administer relief efforts, the

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<sup>127</sup> Terrill, "The Struggle for Yemen," 79; New America Foundation, "The Last Refuge."

United States should facilitate the work of Nongovernmental Organizations (NGOs) in Yemen.<sup>128</sup>

Organizations such as Oxfam have the time, talent, and ability to assist the government of Yemen by providing impartial relief efforts to the most needy regions of the country. Encouraging NGO efforts, and facilitating access to impoverished regions is a low to no cost investment for the United States. It also establishes a stabilizing presence that is not beholden to United States budgetary concerns, foreign policy changes, or shifts in domestic opinion.

Finally, the lessons learned from examining the Al-Hiraak movement in Yemen, and the expected positive gains that will follow a shift to a decentralized federal system can provide policymakers with suggestions to deal with the current crisis in Iraq. Understanding the opportunity provided for Al Qaeda and similar organizations when a centralized government fails to provide adequate opportunity and governance for its people should lead policymakers to frontload efforts to address the political dissonance at its root. Initial steps towards this goal have already been taken through United States efforts to encourage the formation of a new government under a new prime minister. Further efforts to encourage the development of economic opportunities, and adequate representation of the disaffected Sunni populations should follow. Much like how the inclusion of Al-Hiraak in the NDC significantly lessened their claims and gave them a stake in the government, efforts to provide increased political representation for the disaffected Sunni population will likely draw much of their support away from the Islamic State (IS).

In a similar fashion, the government of Iraq should be wary of repressive action against those elements of the Sunni population that are currently cooperating with IS. When a portion of the population is both denied a voice in the government, and repressed by the same government, it is likely to strengthen its resolve rather than dissipate. This occurred when Saleh's government cracked down on Al-Hiraak's early protests, and led them to call for complete secession. Similarly, continued systematic repression of

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<sup>128</sup> Terrill, "The Struggle for Yemen," 83.

the Sunni population will only increase their dissatisfaction with the current government of Iraq, and drive them towards further cooperation with IS.

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